

Ash Wednesday

by Rev. Ann Dieterle

February 6, 2008

Isaiah 58:1-12; 2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10; Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

The BBC World News service reported yesterday that the number of Roman Catholic monks and nuns had declined by 10% in the past 12 months alone- an alarming statistic. When the reporter asked his guest- a former sister- what she thought was responsible for this trend, her reply was two-fold: first, there are a number of other ways to serve the Church now besides religious vocation; and, second, the monastic life is a hard way to live.

I thought that her second point was really just stating the obvious. The monastic life, a life of poverty and chastity, is hardly a desirable or glamorous pattern for living. And you could argue the same about the pattern of Lent that is set before us today on Ash Wednesday. Lenten disciplines of fasting, special discipline and devotion, self-sacrifice and self-denial certainly don't appeal to the senses, at least not naturally.

As we look toward the next 40 days, the Prayer Book and the Scriptures invite us to fast; to practice justice; to store up treasures in heaven, not here on Earth; and, to be reconciled to God.

And what it all really boils down to is living in right relationship with God.

When we live in right relationship with God we are invited to deeper dependency on the One who gives us life. When we live in right relationship with God, we are invited to grateful and graceful acknowledgement of our human limitations. And a right relationship with God invites us to repentance and redemption that only comes when we accept that we are sinners- that we hurt other people, that we don't always keep our promises, that we avoid doing things that we know we ought to do.

And so Lent is the acceptable time, the fitting time to be intentional and deliberate about embracing this pattern of life that makes plain our dependency on the grace of God by stripping away luxury and excess and *simply living*.

This pattern of life would be challenging enough by itself, but I think it's made even more difficult because instant gratification, pleasure and gluttony seem to rule the day and set the agenda for life as we know it. The wider world not only embraces indulgence but shuns any form of discomfort at all costs; and life is not so much about living gracefully and abundantly than it is about avoiding or even cheating death.

But we should not fear death.

Because we know that in Christ Jesus whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord.

On this particular day and in this season of Lent, the Church invites us to embrace our mortality. Charles Wesley, author of some two dozen of the most beautiful texts in our hymnal was once asked what he would do if he knew that a particular day would be his last day on earth. His answer, at least as legend hands it down to us is this: whatever I was planning to do.

In his reply, Wesley recognizes that there is dignity and joy to life. And not just in those extraordinary moments- like birthday celebrations or weddings, or fabulous trips to Europe or Hawaii; but even in the mundane tasks that we find ourselves performing- things we think we might readily give up if we had the opportunity.

When we embrace our mortality, we are invited to accept the reality of death so that we can fully rejoice in and celebrate life. When we accept our mortality, we can truly believe and belong to Christ.

And so we ask ourselves- what will this Lenten pattern look like for me? What areas of my life are out of line, where I'm not living in right relationship with God?

Isaiah invites us to fast, to help us see where we find God in our daily routine. Are our priorities of worship, study, and prayer in order? Lent is a good time to begin a discipline or to enrich one. There are many Lenten devotionals available- short, simple readings that you can do that will provide food for thought and inspiration. Or there are a number of group classes you can take advantage of here: like our Lenten Soup and Suppers or Centering Prayer.

Isaiah also invites us to practice justice. Service to God and to neighbor are important parts of Christian discipleship and to our Lenten pattern of life. When do we neglect those in need, when we could and should help them? We are not supposed to make ourselves destitute in our efforts to assist others, but when we guard our abundance in a way that contributes to another's neglect and suffering, we are guilty of those same things of which Isaiah accuses Israel.

Jesus tells us to store up treasures in Heaven, which is a good way to think of stewardship. How do we practice stewardship? How do we use the gifts of time, talent and treasure that God has given us? I think the single biggest impact any discipline has made in my life was sacrificial giving- not just of treasure but of my time and talents as well. Nothing else brought home the reality of God's generosity and helped me realize that my first gifts should go back to God, which is where they came from in the first place.

St. Paul tells us to be reconciled to God. Lent is a penitential season, and the pattern set forth for us encourages self-reflection and examination. I think we often approach penitence with reluctance because it is such a heavy weight to bear, but the point of bearing that weight is so that we can loose it and be free. If you find that you are carrying a heavy weight this season, I hope that you will not carry it alone. There are two

healing Eucharists here, or you can make a sacramental confession, what we call “Reconciliation of a Penitent” between now and Easter.

Brothers and sisters, now is the acceptable time to embrace this pattern of life that Jesus calls us to. Now is the acceptable time to seek out right relationship with God. And now is the acceptable to put aside fear of death, so that we can embrace life.

Because Jesus came so that we might have life, and live it abundantly.